

# **Rockford Promise NIU Scholarship Could Be Game Changer for Community**

**By Ehren Jarrett and Tom McNamara**

In 2006, retired Rockford physician Dr. John McHugh read about the “Kalamazoo Promise,” where a small group of anonymous donors in the Michigan city was transforming a community by providing full-tuition college scholarships to all graduates of the Kalamazoo Public Schools. Dr. McHugh convinced others to join him in raising money to begin a similar program in Rockford.

Now, nearly 13 years after Rockford Promise became a non-profit, the organization has provided more than \$1 million in scholarships and changed the lives of nearly 150 RPS 205 students who have attended Rock Valley College and Rockford University tuition free as Rockford Promise Scholars. The donors and volunteers who have been involved with Rockford Promise have done incredible work. They’ve positively changed the lives of young people, many of whom literally would not have been able to attend college without the help of Rockford Promise. However, if we want the program to truly affect the future of Rockford, we must dramatically increase its impact.

Earlier this week, we joined Rockford Promise and Northern Illinois University to announce what we truly believe is a game-changing initiative for our community. The City of Rockford is proposing to fund a significant expansion of Rockford Promise to allow eligible students of RPS 205 to earn a bachelor’s degree from NIU, with all tuition and general fees paid.

While we lead organizations that face many short-term challenges and opportunities, it’s critical we take a longer-term view that provides future students and residents the foundation on which to succeed. Past leaders have made decisions and investments in our community from which we all benefit. We must dream big dreams so our children can do the same.

Data shows that our city’s lower rates of educational attainment impacts our ability to attract and retain companies and residents, grow our employment base, provide strong city services, reduce crime, increase property values and lower tax burdens. We share the belief that education is the key to a more prosperous future for our community. When we increase the number of residents with college or career education, we directly and positively influence the health and wealth of our community.

With this program, we anticipate that Rockford Promise will deliver community-wide benefits on an even broader scale than it does now. This may include: increased high school graduation rates and public school performance; higher overall educational attainment; enhanced workforce readiness; higher property values; decreased crime rates; decreased social costs due to increased high school graduation rates and powerful economic incentives for residents and businesses to move to and remain in Rockford.

Perhaps most importantly, this expansion represents an investment in our young people. We are investing in them and showing through words and actions that they belong here and they can have a bright future here.

NIU President Dr. Lisa Freeman understands the importance of providing opportunities to students at a first-class university such as NIU. This expansion would not be possible without her vision and support. Rockford Promise Board President Susan Fumo and Executive Director Tasha Davis know fully the impact on the lives of the Promise Scholars that have attended Rock Valley College and Rockford University. They share our excitement about the potential for this expansion.

The proposed collaboration now heads to the governing boards at NIU, RPS 205 and Rockford Promise and the Rockford City Council for final approval. We look forward to discussing this critical initiative with these members and elected officials. Working together, we can continue to build a stronger foundation for the long-term success of our community.

There are often singular moments that can alter a community's future for the better. We are confident this is one of them.

*Dr. Ehren Jarrett is Superintendent of Rockford Public School District 205. Thomas McNamara is Mayor of the City of Rockford.*

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